

Looking at boys in a different light

Boys and girls are different, any teacher knows that. There was a time when we were encouraged not to think in terms of gender, in case stereotyping reduced the opportunities available to pupils. Stereotyping *is* unhelpful and dangerous; but it is *equally* unhelpful and dangerous not to take into account the differences between pupils, one of these being gender. For it may be that not taking into account boys' characteristics and the way they learn is partly responsible for the current situation across British schools - on average boys results are 10% lower than girls.

What are boys' characteristics?

In order to see if we can understand boys needs better, let's take the risk of stereotyping for a moment and look at some characteristics of boys.

Boys are energetic. They need to move around and find it hard to be still for long periods.

Boys have active minds. Once those minds are switched on to something – be it dinosaurs, cars, computers, football or Lord of the Rings – they can be hooked for years.

Boys need excitement. If they don't find enough excitement where they are, then they simply create their own.

Boys love humour. They respond well to humorous teaching and like 'having a laugh'.

Boys value courage. Though what seems brave to a boy may seem foolhardy to an adult.

Boys follow their own agenda. If school doesn't offer them what they are looking for then they switch off and follow their own interests elsewhere.

How do we see boys?

Some of these characteristics of boys can be difficult in a school context. Boys' energy and their need for excitement and humour can seem disruptive; their active minds may be interested in something other than the topic in hand; their courage can get them into fights or onto the school roof, or into a battle with a teacher; their preference for their own agenda can make them seem lazy or arrogant.

The problem with boys is that boys are perceived as a problem.

We cannot turn boys into something they are not. What we need to do is recognise their characteristics and channel these in positive ways. Can we welcome their maleness, and with it the boisterousness, the toilet humour, the interest in the gory and gruesome, the intolerance of the ordinary, the obsession with sport or computers, the need for adventure and excitement? Can we plan our schools and our lessons to cater for their qualities, to stimulate and challenge them, to include and value them? Can we enjoy their wit and enthusiasm, admire their ability to forgive and forget, and respect their interests and choices?

If we can, then together we will bring out the best in our boys.